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# UNIT 11 COMPARATIVE METHOD

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## 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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Durkheim used comparative method to explain how one set of social facts explains the others. As an example in his study of Suicide Rates, he found the types of social groups in which these rates were high and low. He compared these groups to know their differences, and how these differences could explain the different rates. The method of organising the explanation of facts and the facts that are explained in this way is called comparative method. When you study this unit you will be able to

- point out the use of comparisons in daily life
- locate where comparisons have no special meaning
- find out where comparisons are useful
- identify the uses of comparative methods proposed by Durkheim and Weber
- try out the use of the method through some examples of your own.

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit we begin by looking at events in our daily life and see how comparisons are made. It is pointed out where these are useful and where they are unnecessary e.g. when we say 'these two are not comparable'. Then from daily life, we move to sociology and take examples of comparability from social situations and social science literature. The use

of comparisons by Durkheim is explained and the logic or procedure of reasoning is linked with these studies. Durkheim's use of differential rates of **suicide** and their 'explanation' are pointed out here. Finally, we shall clarify how a comparative method becomes an exercise in indirect **experiment**.

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## 11.2 COMPARISONS IN DAILY LIFE

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In our daily life we come across many situations when we have to decide if a thing (called A) is more suited for us than any other (B or C). Then we compare A, B and C. For instance which Sari has to be purchased? Colour of A may be more appealing than of B or C; border of B may be the best; perhaps C may have a combination of colour and the border and we opt for it. All the time what have we been doing? We have been comparing the merits and suitability of the three items. Comparisons help us to take appropriate decisions in daily life, where alternatives are available. Hence the first requirement of comparisons is that alternatives are available. The second is that these things should belong to the same category or class of objects. We do not compare cotton with silk or wool. Thirdly there should be some difference among the objects; and finally this difference should be within narrow limits. There is no point in comparing a silk sari of Rs. 300 with one of Rs. 3,000. In common day usage we will say the two are not comparable. Our proverbs too state the same point "where is *Raja Bhoj* and where the *Gangu Teli*"; or simply where is the Raja and where the oilman, Bhoj and Gangu being just proper names. So comparisons to be useful have to be within the same class, and there has to be some difference, which is meaningful. When the difference is minor, it is called a distinction, and the logicians say, "this is a distinction without a difference". The idea in such cases is that the distinction is too small to influence our decision. A politician referring to such a smallness of distinctions in the other two parties thought they were really of one hue - that one was "*Sarp Nath*" and the other "*Nag Nath*". Thus we come across three situations:

- 1) The difference among two or more objects or social facts is meaningful and needs an explanation.
- 2) The difference is too small to deserve attention.
- 3) The difference is too large to need any attention.

The second situation is a case of "distinction without a difference". If a Cricket team wins over the other side by 210 runs or 220 runs, the difference of these 10 runs is hardly a difference to be accounted for. At times, we find difficulty in picking a team and are unable to decide which of the three players A, B or C can become a member of the playing team. We then tend to say that one is as good as the other. There is hardly a difference. In the third case, the difference could be as large as among Gavaskar and some other opening batsman; or a Kapil and any other opening bowler. Then we will say, for the sake of logic, Gavaskar or Kapil is not comparable with other opening batsmen or bowlers.

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## 11.3 COMPARISONS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The meaningful or relevant difference is important in scientific discussions. The experiences of daily life are refined. The differences can be studied in the same phenomenon over a period of time. For example urbanisation in India can be studied from 1901 to 2001, fall in death rate from 1931 to 2001 or increase in literacy over the same period; or a rise in the expectation of life at birth. Durkheim studied the social rates of suicide in France over the later part of the nineteenth century. Likewise the phenomenon can be studied at different places. Within India same social facts can be studied for different States. We may ask, “How is it that party A succeeds in State X but not Y?” or “How is it that literacy exceeds fifty per cent in one part of the country, but remains around twenty in some other parts?” In the Asian or the Third World context we may as well ask, “How does the democratic form of Government last in some States, but not others?” On the other hand Lipset and Bendix studied social mobility among the industrial societies. A phrase ‘industrial democracies’ indicates the category of nations that are comparable.

### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Give one example of differences in the same phenomenon over a period of time.  
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- ii) Give one example of variations in the same phenomenon at different places.  
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## 11.4 TYPES OF COMPARISONS ATTEMPTED BY DURKHEIM

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Durkheim wants it to be understood that comparisons can be made

- i) of variations of a phenomenon in different parts of a society
- ii) of variations of a phenomenon in different societies at a time
- iii) of variations of a phenomenon among different societies at different times corresponding to their levels of development.

Let us now discuss each type of comparison.

### 11.4.0 Comparisons within a Society

Durkheim in his study of Suicide (1897) demonstrated the illustration of the first type. He compared the different rates of suicides among various sections of the French society. (Suicide rate is calculated by the number of persons committing suicide in one year in a population of one million.) Durkheim asked the question: How is **suicide rate** distributed among the males and the females, rural and urban populations, persons following Catholic and Protestant faiths, and married and unmarried persons? He

processed data according to the categories in the question. He has examined the data on differences according to seasons and ‘cosmic’ factors and came to some conclusions other than those already proposed. He found that the rate of suicide had very little to do with the seasons and cosmic factors, such as daytime, evening or night, etc. The rate increased where the social bonds were either too weak (as in the case of **egoistic suicide**) or too strong (as in the case of **altruistic suicide**) in a social group.

**Activity 1**

Obtain from the 2001 census of India the different rates of birth among various sections (i) the male and the female, (ii) rural and urban population (iii) working and non-working classes of Indian society. Write your conclusions on the nature of differences (based on this comparison) of birth rates in Indian society. Compare your findings with those of other students at your Study Centre, if possible.

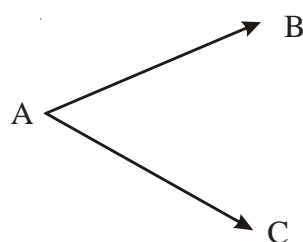
**11.4.1 Comparisons among Different Societies at a Point of Time**

The second type of study relates to the examination of the data from different countries of Europe. Durkheim took the case of Germany as a Protestant country and of Spain as a Catholic country. He found that suicide rates were higher in Germany than in Spain, hence the idea that Protestants commit more suicides than the Catholics. The Jews came still lower. Now we with this kind of comparison move to a new stage in comparative studies. Durkheim studied variations in two phenomena not one, (i) suicide rates and (ii) religions. Variations or changes in the first are accompanied by changes in the second. That is, they vary or change together. This is called concomitant **variation**, i.e. variation or change occurring together. Do you remember a nursery rhyme of “Mary had a little lamb....” The important line for our present purposes is “And everywhere that Mary went, the little lamb was sure to go”. This is a case of two living beings moving together. Some people think that sports and discipline are found together; the rise of the middle class opens the habit of questioning etc. These would also be examples of things changing together. They provide examples of concomitant variation. Thus comparative method tries to see

- i) what are the variations in a phenomenon?
- ii) which other variations occur along with those under examination?

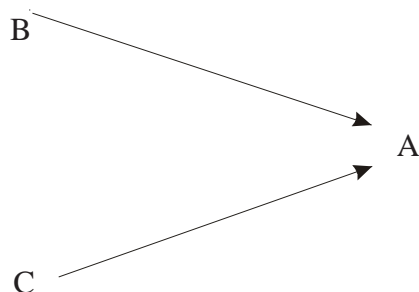
This means that comparative method attempts to find out a possible cause for the phenomenon under study

There can be some problems here. More than two things may change at a time. This can be stated in a diagram or a statement.

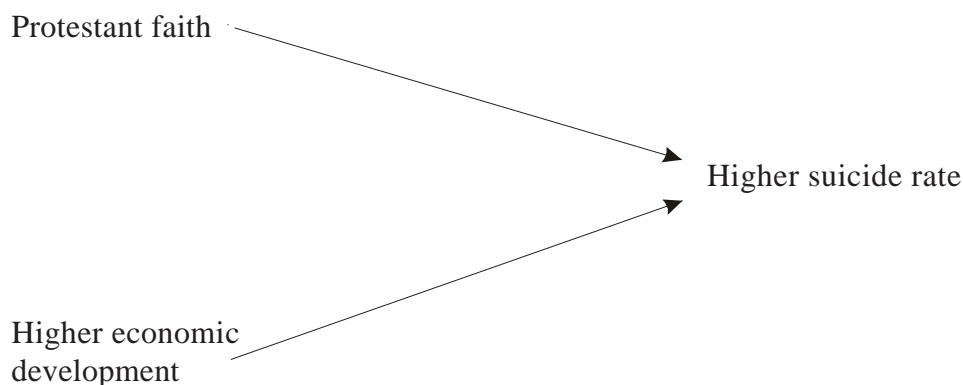


A change in A leads to a change in B as well as C... may be even D and E. Then how shall we say A is related to B? We can now put the arrows in the other direction and see even more clearly. Suppose B can lead to A, and C can also lead to A.

Then we have the situation



Can A then be called a consequence of B, or of C? Durkheim's example can be put here:



This was the case in Germany. Catholic faith and low level of economic development were found in Spain. What shall we do? Shall we say it is the religious difference that is crucial or the level of economic development?

Durkheim attempted a solution. He took only one country; so the question of difference in the level of economic development did not arise. Then the study was designed thus:

Level of economic development	Religious faith	Suicide rate
1) High	Protestant	High
2) High	Catholic	Low

Through this design, it is possible to say that the difference in religious faith is accompanied by difference in the suicide rate; that is, the two vary together. This is concomitant variation. This remains true even when the level of economic development is the same. Keeping this the same, or constant, or controlled (these words are similar in meaning), we get the result that religious faiths have an impact on the differential social suicide rates.

### 11.4.2 Comparisons over a Period of Time

Durkheim clarifies the significance of the time factor in social science studies. Some people try to compare events happening at the same time in different countries. Durkheim objects to this procedure. His view is that different societies may not be at the same level of development at one point of time. The youth of one cannot be compared with the grown-up stage of another. Thus at one point of time, Spain and Germany were not comparable. We can add other examples from our experiences. We do not compare the capacities or abilities of a primary school boy with those of those of university students. Likewise some writers think that nineteenth century Europe or Japan is comparable to the developing societies of late twentieth century; (others would have objections to this procedure) and that developing countries of today cannot be compared to the developed ones of the present.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- i) State in three lines the types of comparison attempted by Durkheim.

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- ii) Describe concomitant variation in about two lines.

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## 11.5 INDIRECT EXPERIMENT

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In natural sciences, it is possible in a laboratory experiment to use the controls effectively. We can check one factor from operating, or allow it to become ineffective in an experiment. In social situations it is not feasible that way. If we want to know what would have happened if free India had Vallabhabhai Patel as Prime Minister, we have no method of removing Nehru and putting Patel instead. Of course neither of them is available; but even if they were, they would not have obliged the social scientist to undertake the experiment. If we want to know the possibilities of a State being ruled by some other party than the one ruling it, the situation cannot be created by us for study. At best, we can make a guess work, or talk indirectly. Indirectly in the sense that a party has worked elsewhere in a particular way, and it might try to repeat its performance at a different place or time. Thus social scientist cannot order events to happen in a particular way to study the situation; i.e. the scope of experiment is very-very limited. What is he to do then? To attempt a scientific study or to give it up? Durkheim would not give up the method of science. He would find situations that provide comparisons and explanations of the type mentioned about suicide rates. Even without a laboratory, social facts can be so arranged as if that had been done in an experiment. Thus economic differences were not allowed to come in the way of studying the relationship

of religion with suicide. This comparison among two religions in the same region i.e., in the, same economy, amounts to an experimental situation, discovered by the social scientist, though not created by him in the laboratory. Therefore Durkheim calls for such use of comparative method an indirect experiment.

Now we have used three sets of words (i) comparisons; (ii) comparative method; (iii) indirect experiment. As we move from an account of comparisons to explanations of events, we move to the second position. The set of words 'comparative method' and 'indirect experiment' convey the same meaning; the second clarifies explicitly the power of explanation. So we recollect: it is not useful to put things or events in parallel lines in a table without first asking, are things comparable? Yes, things are comparable when they belong to the same category, and have differences that need an explanation. So things or social facts should belong to the same **Genus** but to different Species. Try the following exercise.

### Activity 2

Do you agree with the formulation of Durkheim that if we can find an example of a social institution in its simplest and purest form we can understand the essence of that institution? If yes, give two reasons for your acceptance of Durkheim's view. If no, give at least one reason for your disagreement with his view. Compare your answer, if possible with those of other students at your Study Centre.

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## 11.6 A SINGLE CASE AS EXPERIMENT

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Lastly we invite your attention to one more situation. Can an experiment be done by taking up one case only? One experiment conducted in a satisfactory manner can be decisive under certain conditions. Suppose we take the view that social objects were simple in the beginning, and have become more complex with the passage of time.

Then the true form of the thing was in the beginning. Persons who go on pilgrimage to the Gangotri in search of the fountainhead of the purest river act on this principle. Water at the source is the purest, and as we proceed from the sky to the ocean, more and more rivers mix up with the stream, and perhaps the Hooghly word itself signifies dirty water, and the river near Calcutta is the least pure. Thus Allahabad may have purer water than Varanasi, and Haridwar purer than Allahabad. Then by this logic the purest form of water is to be found at the Gangotri. That is the purest at the point of origin, "the simplest and the purest". If we can find an example of a social institution in its simplest and purest form we can understand the 'essence' of that institution. Thus Durkheim studied the social institution of religion among the Australian tribes and traced the essential characteristics of religion in their existing practices. In such cases, the single study acquires an experimental character. It clarifies the 'essentials' without bothering about dilutions. In India, the followers of the Arya Samaj act on the same principle considering the vedic religion as pure, and later growth as an admixture of the wrong practices added on to it.

**Check Your Progress 3**

i) Tick mark YES or NO for following question.

Are the following social situations comparable?

a) the ruler and the ruled

Yes	No
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b) the priest and the cobbler

Yes	No
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c) Chundawat Rajput and Shaktawat Rajput

Yes	No
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d) Soviet Union and the U.S.A.

Yes	No
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e) Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh

Yes	No
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ii) Explain in ten lines how comparative method amounts to an 'indirect experiment'.

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**11.7 LET US SUM UP**

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We may summarise now. Comparisons are undertaken by people in everyday life for making proper choice among the alternatives. The alternatives are usually comparable, i.e. they belong to the same genus,



but different species. There is no point in going for ‘comparisons’ among different species. In sociology, we use these words ‘genus’ and ‘species’ for social facts like customs, institutions and social currents. Best results are obtained when classifications of these facts are made, and differences within each class are then taken into consideration. The differences in one set of social facts are then tried in relation to another set. If two sets change together, we say this is a case of concomitant variation. We may find more than one case of these variations. Then, we try to ‘control’ one set of variations; that is, keep it constant. (Remember how the level of economic development was kept constant by Durkheim.)

Then we see if one set of variations goes along with changes in the other. If yes, we say there is a sort of a cause-effect relationship among them; or the closeness of relationship is not by chance alone. This exercise resembles an experiment; but as the situation cannot be ordered like in a laboratory, it is called an ‘indirect experiment’. This is the most effective use of the comparative method — to bring it to the level of an indirect experiment. An exceptional use of the indirect experiment through one study can be seen in the study of the purest and the simplest case.

Durkheim developed these ideas in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), and practised them in the study of the *Suicide* (1897). The exceptional case was mentioned in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1911). He maintained that the possibility of the use of scientific method in studying societies is not a matter of philosophical debate: it can be demonstrated, and he did that in his studies spread over two decades with rare consistency. Finally, let us understand that any study gives us (i) significant results and (ii) an account of the method followed — the method can later be used in other studies — yes, by any one of us.

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## 11.8 KEY WORDS

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**Altruistic Suicide** In societies where the individual consciousness is so submerged with the collective consciousness of the society, the kind of suicide found is altruistic in nature. For example, sati or jouhar of women in India.

**Egoistic Suicide** In societies where the individuals are not properly integrated in society and where a person gives too much importance to his or her ego the kind of suicide found is egoistic suicide.

**Experiment** The word is used in natural sciences. It is usual to divide a group into two parts: one is kept in its original state (control group); in the other a change is introduced (experimental group). After some time the results are compared. Any difference is then taken as a result of the change introduced. If there is no difference, the new thing is not effective. Experiment thus proves which is the case — is the new thing

effective or useless. It is a method for arriving at a conclusive proof.

**Genus**

The broad category to which living beings of different types belong. In social sciences, the broader category or class of facts to which a number of facts belong. Genus is a wider category than species. Species are the first order to which facts belong. A number of species sharing some common characteristics belong to one Genus.

**Suicide and Suicide Rate**

The act of killing or ending one's own life is suicide. When a number of people commit suicide in a society, suicides are calculated according to the proportion of suicides per 1,000,000 (one million) population per year. This is the suicide rate.

**Variation**

Different scores of one item under study e.g. variation in literacy rates like 20 per cent, 30 per cent, 50 per cent; different scores of suicide rates e.g. 8 per 10,000 per year, 9 or 10. Concomitant variation means changes in two selected items, which go together e.g. as urbanisation increases the rate of suicide also increases.

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## 11.9 FURTHER READING

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Aron, R. 1967. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Volume 2. Penguin Books: London

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## 11.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Urbanisation in India 1901 to 1981
- ii) Literacy in different states of India in 1951

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Durkheim attempted comparisons of one phenomenon spread over different groups in a society (suicide rates among the rural and the urban); comparisons among different societies (Spain and Germany); and those among two groups within a society (using one as a control group).
- ii) Concomitant variation means changes which take place in one item leading to changes in the other item.

### Check Your Progress 3

### Comparative Method

- i) No for a & b  
Yes for c, d and e
- ii) See Section 11.5