Durkheim’s fundamental task in *Rules of the Sociological Method* is to lay out the basic disciplinary structure of sociology. He begins by asking: What is sociology? What should we study? Where should we start? He then lays out two propositions: (1) Social facts must be treated as things (not ideas), and (2) Social phenomena are external to individuals. It is these two propositions that enable Durkheim to posit one his main claim: that individual acts in society are based on social coercion. Durkheim understands individual’s actions as determined by the collective; as a result, he argues that sociology must be a study of the collective.

For Durkheim, everything happens “in the social,” where social facts can be observed and are objectively true. It is Durkheim’s emphasis on the collective that, when combined with his belief in causation, lead him to develop a theory of social coercion, which is the driving force behind society. The collective’s expression of coercion comes in explicit forms such as laws and morality, but also takes more subtle forms such as conformity by free will (e.g. choosing to act in a way that is deemed appropriate by society).

Having established the focus of sociology as a discipline, Durkheim turns to methods. In his quest for an objective, specific methodology distinct from other disciplines, Durkheim is careful to define his terms; he defines a social fact as “any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; or which is general over the whole of a given society while having an
existence of its own, independent of individual manifestations.” (p. 59) He defines an institution as “all the beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity.” (p. 45) In Durkheim’s view, sociology can be understood as the study of institutions.

Durkheim defines the sociological task as identifying that which is entirely outside of the intrinsic psyche of the individual, that which brings the individual into the collective of society. He criticizes earlier scholars such as Comte and Spencer for trying to conceptualize ideas, rather than focusing on “things”. He sees Comte as stuck in the realm of ideology, while he critiques Spencer for starting from a preconception which he has not proved (that all societies are based on cooperation). Durkheim argues that the sociologist must focus on the study of things; because ideas are internal; they require a level of self-reflexivity that is unwarranted in sociology.

For Durkheim, there exists a logical method for considering social facts as things (p. 60). We cannot be satisfied with merely forming ideas about that which we see and experience in the social world. First, the sociologist must observe, compare and describe things so that we can analyze them. Durkheim posits that reflecting on ideas and attempting to analyze them without stepping outside the realm of individual consciousness is specifically not the work of a sociologist. A sociologist must strive to understand the social phenomena that occur among the collective, and this understanding is achieved by employing a scientific method. We cannot rely on ideological assumptions, dialectical arguments, or axioms to prove a theory.

From Durkheim’s work on methodology, we take four guiding principles: First, social scientists must operationalize and measure social facts, not just formulate ideas about them. Second, the sociologist’s unit of analysis must be groups and not
individuals, because the study of groups allows us to see variation. Third, social science is based on using comparative methods, across time and across groups, again in order to highlight variation. Finally, the goal of social science is not simply seeking to understand the social facts we observe and measure; rather, social science is deeply concerned with causality.

*Suicide* is an application of Durkheim’s ideal of sociological methods, in which he focuses on the collective to understand and posit theories of causation for a particular phenomenon, the social fact of suicide. In this work, Durkheim describes a particular type of suicide: anomic suicide, which occurs when a person is unable to adapt to a change in social situation that brings about instability. Durkheim argues that the social crisis plays a causal role in the incidence of suicides. If we accept Durkheim’s argument that social processes occur through coercion by way of explicit rules and implicit norms, then we can accept the argument that a lack of order would make a person act in a pathological manner (e.g. committing suicide).

In our opinion, Durkheim’s major limiting assumption, however, lies in his definition of marriage—“a regulation of sexual activity” (p. 270)—which he goes on to use as a key variable in his analysis of suicide and its causes. One would think that given Durkheim’s emphasis on studying institutions, he would give the institution of marriage a bit more attention before defining it and using it (or the absence of it) as such an important variable in his work. In these two very important respects, Durkheim does not stay true to the arguments made in the *Rules*. While this does not necessarily detract from the overall strength of his analysis (which is indeed quite rigorous), it does call into question the necessity of the method he lays out in the *Rules*. 
We identified several concerns and limitations with Durkheim’s *Rules* and *Suicide*. In his methodological work, we wondered if the pursuit of an objective truth of the social world is realistic. To achieve true objectivity seems to require that one get so far from interpretation as to render the work too abstract. Durkheim seems to fail to identify where his own definitions are based on interpretation and intuition, and he never addresses the idea that social “facts” are socially constructed and thus by their very nature open to interpretation. We wondered if discarding representations would, in essence, mean discarding the collective understanding about those representations, rendering these “facts” so abstract and unknowable as to make them almost meaningless. Durkheim also seems to dismiss the possibility that there is any value to being “within” that which one is studying. Finally, he never really seems to tell us how to step outside of ourselves and our experiences in order to achieve the level of objectivity which he seeks.

In *Suicide*, Durkheim writes as if he believes that it is a phenomenon that exists as a force “out there” and that some (e.g. divorced men), due to variables he introduces, are more susceptible to it than others. Additionally, he fails to follow his own advice about objectivity. For example, when he writes about the differences in suicide rates between Catholics and Protestants, one wonders if impressions of religious practices are self-reported and how we can know if a person viewed their religion as Durkheim describes. Finally, Durkheim uses only a univariate model to disprove alternate theories when he rules out the nature of a physical environment and the organic-psychic constitution of individuals as causes of suicide, without considering whether there was a relationship between the two which could lead to suicide, while employing multiple
variables to prove his own theory, as when he focuses on the interplay between gender, marital status, and religion. Clearly, Durkheim has considered the multiplicity and complexity of the factors and causes of suicide rates overall; however, his specific arguments do not always reflect this understanding.

Durkheim writes with the passion of a pioneer, carving out and advocating for a new brand of scientific inquiry. He has theoretical “blind spots,” however, as highlighted in his explanation of externality and its importance to the proper observation of social facts, where Durkheim exposes a serious contradiction between his theoretical foundations and his approach to the task of research. In establishing his theoretical framework, Durkheim argues the need for objectivity. He values social facts that are detached from their individual manifestations. Durkheim’s warnings about preconceptions and the sociologist’s obligation to discover rather than intuit lead the reader to assume that Durkheim takes a broad, non-specific definition of an institution like the family. Yet, when describing the researcher’s method, Durkheim retreats, suggesting that the scope of inquiry should be limited to the legal definitions of family. In noting that this approach is but a preliminary step in the evolution of sociological research, Durkheim recognizes its limitations; however, he does not seem to be aware that he has contradicted his own theory in applying it to research—that he has broken his own rule.