

## Representation and affect in Durkheim's and Freud's works.

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### Abstract

The research aims at comparing the works of Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, with the objective of answering two main questions: (i) How do affects and representations interact, for these authors, in the course of human intellection?; (ii) In what conditions is scientific objectivity possible, for them, given that the activity of thinking is always threatened by the possible interference of emotional life?

*Key words: Durkheim, Freud, representation*

### Introduction

Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, participants in a shared intellectual context, wrote about a variety of similar themes. Among these were the nature of inner psychic life, and the foundations of scientific knowledge. Their results, however, differed profoundly in theoretical matters. The research thus proposed has been an attempt to investigate how (and if) Freud's and Durkheim's views on the functioning of the mind allowed for the sustenance of their concepts of "objectivity". It aimed, then, at subsequently comparing their theories, in order to understand how such different conclusions could arise from an apparently common epistemological background.

### Results and Discussion

Apart from sharing some common epistemological assumptions – mainly derived from a naturalist standpoint –, Durkheim and Freud had different views about the relation between the individual and society. While Freud didn't distinguish between individual and social psychic contents, Durkheim admitted collective psychic phenomena were to be considered as qualitatively distinct. As a result, their theories gave to science, and to the activity of thinking as a whole, different social and individual functions. For Freud, the mind remained as an apparatus for the management of pleasure. Even social institutions, alongside the representations associated to them, were regarded by him as collective supports to this basic individual task. The combination of affects and representations gave way to the formation of *instincts*, desires whose satisfaction consisted in the final goal of each singular mind. Science evolved as a cultural means to facilitating the task of obtaining satisfaction, and of protecting people from external dangers. The condition for the production of objective knowledge was seen as the cultural formation (through moral education) of psychic characters capable of struggling against the will to avoid the unpleasant components of truth. Durkheim, in his turn, similarly considered

objectivity as a matter of individual struggle against prejudice and desire. For him, however, truth was only obtainable through social communication. It came as the result of the association of individual representations, which led to the production of *collective* (scientific) ideas. Social psychic contents were not related, then, to the satisfaction of *individual* necessities: they were taken to be built in order to regulate and preserve social order – that is, in order to satisfy the *group's* necessities and conditions of existence.

### Conclusions

For both Freud and Durkheim, affects and representations interact in order to produce and guarantee the satisfaction of individual necessities. Durkheim's sociology then distinguishes collective representations (including scientific ones) as relative to social necessities of the group. In Freud's case, science emerges historically as a social institution among others, whose function is to help preserve individual satisfaction, both subjectively and objectively. In Durkheim's case, science appears as a (also historically conditioned) necessary means for the maintenance of social life. Objectivity is seen as possible, in both their works, as long as the individual thinker is capable of fighting his own needs and desires, in the name of obtaining truth.

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