

EMILE DURKHEIM

Introduction

- Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was the most influential theorist in the state of modern structural perspectives on criminality.
- Influenced by the American and French revolutions and the Industrial Revolution, Durkheim developed a general model of societal development largely based on the economic labor distribution, in which societies are seen as evolving from simplistic mechanical society toward a multilayered organic society in his dissertation entitled *The Division of Labor in Society* (His PhD Dissertation).
- Durkheim Bibliography:
The Division of Labor in Society (1893)
The Rules of Sociological Method (1895)
Suicide (1897)
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912)

Durkheim's Basic Assumptions

- Like Cesare Lombroso, Durkheim was a positivist, but with a social rather than a biological focus. Durkheim argued that an explanation of personal behavior must take into account the diverse social forces surrounding the individual. Constitutional or biological factors were insufficient to explain crime; social factors have to be taken in consideration.
- Durkheim assumed that social facts are quantifiable and measurable things, and may compose the ingredients of scientific analysis. Such social facts, as opposed to individual phenomena, may include such features as customs, obligations, laws, morality, and religious beliefs.
- Societies develop from simple and homogeneous populations to advanced states with division of labor, any explanations of deviance must also change. Consequently, an interpretation of various social pathologies such as suicide, divorce, or crime, for example, varies from one state of community development and organization to another and from one time to another.
- Durkheim was an early advocate of applied sociology and criminology. That is, theoretical knowledge and application can be used to change social conditions, such as crime.

- Durkheim used historical and comparative analysis to better understand social features. That is, how have a social phenomena (e.g. suicide) fluctuated from one decade to another and from one society to another?

Durkheim's Key Ideas

The Normalcy of Crime

- To Durkheim, crime is a normal, necessary part of society – **Structural Functionalism**: Sociological perspective that posits that social parts are integrated and function to maintain the structural whole.
- Durkheim thought that crime served several functions in society.
- First, it defines the moral boundaries of society – What is right and wrong; what are the rules of society.
- Second, the identification of rule-breakers creates a bond among the other members of the society. In fact, society members may, in the face of rule breakers, be drawn more closely together → higher social cohesiveness (Remember 9/11).
- Durkheim was an early proponent of general deterrence theory. He did not elaborate on the nature or degree of particular crimes that might allow others to witness and learn from the consequent punishments, but he saw a small percentage of social deviants as beneficial for boundary maintenance of the larger community. For instance, a small child can never totally understand behavioral expectations if not permitted to occasionally violate the rules.

Social Order and Disorder

- Durkheim labeled societies as mechanical and organic societies.
- In primitive, **mechanical societies** all members perform the same functions. Such similarities in work, as well as constant interaction with like members of the society, leads to a strong uniformity of values, which Durkheim called collective conscience. Collective conscience is the degree to which individuals of a society think alike (The totality of social likeness).
- The similar norms and values among people in these primitive mechanical societies creates "**mechanical solidarity**," a very simple-layered social structure with a very strong collective conscience.
- In mechanical societies, law functions to enforce the conformity of the groups.

- In **organic societies** in the industrial age, the distribution of labor becomes more highly specified.
- “**Organic Solidarity**” exists when people tend to depend on other groups because of the highly specified division of labor, and laws have the primary function of regulating the interactions and maintaining solidarity among the groups.
- Moving from a mechanical to an organic society very rapidly results in a breaking down on societal bonds creating a climate for antisocial behavior.
- To Durkheim, mechanical societies could count on relative consensus about moral values and norms, and this sometimes led to too much control and a stagnation of creative thought. Durkheim thought that progress in society typically depends on deviating from established moral boundaries, especially if society is in the mechanical stage.
- Modern societies do not have such extreme restraint against deviations from established norms. As organic societies are multicultural and multiethnic in nature, a consensus about norms and values does not exist and law is necessary to regulate individual behaviors.
- Durkheim emphasized that human beings have no internal mechanism to signal when their needs and desires are satiated. Therefore, the selfish desires of humankind are limitless; the more an individual has; the more he or she wants. Laws need to be promulgated to set limits on human tendencies as people are greedy by nature.

Anomie

- When society’s ability to serve as a regulatory mechanism breaks down, the selfish, greedy tendencies of individuals are uncontrolled causing a state of **Anomie**, or normlessness. Societies in such anomic states experience increases in many social problems, particularly criminal activity.
- The concept was first introduced by Durkheim in his study on the social dimensions of the division of labor. Durkheim argued that the division of labor is not problematic as long as it is sufficiently regulated. However, under exceptional circumstances, Durkheim maintained, the division of labor will take on an anomic form, either because there is a lack of regulation or because the level of regulation does not match the degree of development of the division of labor. Durkheim saw such anomic forms present during periods of industrial crises, in the conflict between labor

and capital, and in the lack of unity and excessive degree of specialization in the sciences.

- In his famous study on suicide, Durkheim (1897) extended the anomie perspective when, next to altruistic and egoistic suicide, he identified the anomic type of suicide. Durkheim argued that anomic suicide takes place when normative regulations are absent, such as in the world of trade and industry (chronic anomie), or when abrupt transitions in society lead to a loss in the effectiveness of norms to regulate behavior (acute anomie). The latter type explains the high suicide rate during fiscal crises and among divorced men.
- Durkheim's anomie concept was not widely influential in sociology until it was adopted and expanded in Robert K. Merton's theory of deviant behavior and opportunity structures.

Sources

Mutchnick, R. J., Martin, R., & Austin, W. T. (2009). *Criminological thought: Pioneers past and present*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.