


Emile Durkheim

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Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of Emile Durkheim as presented in his *books* listed in the bibliography. A complete summary of his and other macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell.



Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917



Major Contributions

- ▶ Several major contributions to sociology:
 - Distinguishing and elaborating the field of sociology from other social sciences
 - Emphasis on empirical data to lend support to theoretical speculations
 - Focus on the division of labor and its consequences for social life
 - Collective conscience or the need for a common core of values and moral rules
 - Functionalism

Social Facts

According to Durkheim, social facts are the subject matter of sociology. Social facts are “sui generis” (meaning of its own kind; unique) and must be studied distinct from biological and psychological phenomenon.

Social Facts

Social facts can be defined as patterns of behavior that are capable of exercising some coercive power upon individuals. They are guides and controls of conduct and are external to the individual in the form of norms, mores, and folkways.

Social Fact

“A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals”
(Durkheim, [1895] 1982, p. 56).

Social Facts


Through socialization and education these rules become internalized in the consciousness of the individual. These constraints and guides become moral obligations to obey social rules.

Human Dualism

“There are in each of us...two consciences: one which is common to our group in its entirety...the other, on the contrary, represents that in us which is personal and distinct, that which makes us an individual” ([1893] 1933: 129).


Human Dualism

“Because society surpasses us, it obliges us to surpass ourselves, and to surpass itself, a being must, to some degree, depart from its nature—a departure that does not take place without causing more or less painful tensions” (Elementary Forms [1914] 1973, p. 163).



Human Dualism

“It is not without reason, therefore, that man feels himself to be double: he actually is double....In brief, this duality corresponds to the double existence that we lead concurrently; the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society”
(Elementary Forms, [1914] 1973, p. 162).



Human Dualism


Our purely individual side seeks satisfaction of all wants and desires. It knows no boundaries. This side of human beings quickly leads to a condition that Durkheim labels as “anomie.”

Anomie

“It is this anomic state that is the cause, as we shall show, of the incessantly recurrent conflicts, and the multifarious disorders of which the economic world exhibits so sad a spectacle” ([1893] 1933: 5).

Anomie

Durkheim characterized the modern individual as insufficiently integrated into society. Because of these weakening bonds, social regulation breaks down and the controlling influence of society on the desires and interests of the individual is rendered ineffective; individuals are left to their own devices.



Anomie

Because of the dual nature of human beings this breakdown of moral guidance results in rising rates of deviance, social unrest, unhappiness, and stress.

Anomie

"The more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs" (1951, p. 248).

Anomie


“When there is no other aim but to outstrip constantly the point arrived at, how painful to be thrown back!...Since imagination is hungry for novelty, and ungoverned, it gropes at random” ([1897] 1951, p. 257).

Anomie

“Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity. Being unlimited, they constantly and infinitely surpass the means at their command; they cannot be quenched. Inextinguishable thirst is constantly renewed torture” ([1897] 1951, p. 247).

Anomie

“To the extent that the individual is left to his own devices and freed from all social constraint, he is unfettered too by all moral constraint” (Professional Ethics and Civic Morals, Durkheim [1950] p. 7).



Anomie


Durkheim identifies two major causes of anomie: the division of labor, and rapid social change. Both of these are, of course, associated with modernity.

Anomie

An increasing division of labor weakens the sense of identification with the wider community and thereby weakens constraints on human behavior. These conditions lead to social “disintegration”—high rates of egocentric behavior, norm violation, and consequent de-legitimation and distrust of authority.

Collective Conscience

According to Durkheim, the desires and self-interests of human beings can only be held in check by forces that originate outside of the individual. Durkheim characterizes this external force as a collective conscience, a common social bond that is expressed by the ideas, values, norms, beliefs, and ideologies of a culture.




Collective Conscience

“As there is nothing within an individual which constrains these appetites, they must surely be contained by some force exterior to him, or else they would become insatiable—that is morbid” [1928] 1978, p. 213).


Collective Conscience

As the collective conscience originates with society, Durkheim elaborated the cause and effects of weakening group ties (and thus a weakening of the collective conscience) on the individual in his two works, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897).




Collective Conscience

In *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim identifies two forms or types of solidarity, which are based on different sources. Mechanical solidarity is “solidarity which comes from likeness and is at its maximum when the collective conscience completely envelops our whole conscience and coincides in all points with it.”



Collective Conscience: Mechanical

Mechanical solidarity occurs in early societies in which there is not much division of labor. Such societies are relatively homogenous, men and women engage in similar tasks and daily activities, people have similar experiences. In such societies the few distinct institutions express similar values and norms and tend to reinforce one another.



Collective Conscience: Mechanical


The norms, values, and beliefs of the society (or the collective conscience) are so homogenous and confront the individual with such overwhelming and consistent force, that there is little opportunity in such societies for individuality or deviance from this collective conscience.

Collective Conscience: Mechanical

According to Durkheim, traditional cultures experience a high level of social and moral integration, there was little individuation, and most behaviors were governed by social norms which were usually embodied in religion.


Collective Conscience: Mechanical

By engaging in the same activities and rituals, people in traditional societies shared common moral values, which Durkheim called a collective conscience. In these societies, people tend to regard themselves as members of a group; the collective conscience embraces individual awareness, and there is little sense of personal options.



Collective Conscience: Organic

Organic solidarity develops as a by-product of the division of labor. As society becomes more complex, individuals play more specialized roles and become ever more dissimilar in their social experiences, material interests, values, and beliefs.



Collective Conscience: Organic


Individuals in such a sociocultural system have less in common; however, they must become more dependent upon each other for their survival

Collective Conscience: Organic

The growth of individualism is an inevitable result of the increasing division of labor, and this individualism can only develop at the expense of the common values, morality, beliefs, and normative rules of society—the sentiments and beliefs that are held by all.

Collective Conscience: Organic

With the loosening of these common rules and values we also lose our sense of community, or identity with the group. The social bond is thereby weakened and social values and beliefs no longer provide us with coherent or insistent moral guidance.




Collective Conscience: Organic

And this loosening lends itself to anomie.

Again, according to Durkheim, if an individual lacks any sense of social restraint her self-interest will be unleashed, she will seek to satisfy her own appetites with little thought on the possible effect her action will have on others.

Collective Conscience: Organic

Instead of asking “is this moral?” or “does my family approve?” the individual is more likely to ask “does this action meet my needs?” The individual is left to find her own way in the world—a world in which personal options for behavior have multiplied as strong and insistent norms and moral guidelines have weakened.



Religion

As Durkheim was concerned with moral behavior and social justice he naturally turned to the study of religion

Religion

All religions divide social life into two spheres, the “sacred” and the “profane.” There is nothing intrinsic about a particular object which makes it sacred. An object becomes sacred only when the community invests it with that meaning.

Religion

[Religion is] "an eminently collective thing" (1954, p.47). It serves to bind a community together.

Religion


“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (1954, p. 47).

Religion

"The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, wither to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them" (1954, p. 416).

Religion

"Thus there is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself. There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality. ..




Religion

“Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies, and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments; hence come ceremonies which do not differ from regular religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results.

Religion

“What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates in the life of Christ, or of Jews remembering the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?”
(1954, p. 427).



Religion

Durkheim then goes a step further. Religion is not only a social creation; it is the power of the community itself that is being worshiped. The power of the community over the individual so transcends individual existence that people collectively give it sacred significance.

Religion

By worshiping God people are unwittingly worshiping the power of the collective over them—a power that both created and guides them. They are worshiping society itself.

Religion


It is religion is one of the main forces that make up the collective conscience; religion which allows the individual to transcend self and act for the social good. But traditional religion was weakening under the onslaught of the division of labor; what could replace religion as the common bond?

Religion

“The great things of the past which filled our fathers with enthusiasm do not excite the same ardor in us...In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born...But this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last for ever. ..

Religion

“A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity; and when these hours shall have been passed through once, men will spontaneously feel the need of reliving them from time to time in thought, that is to say, of keeping alive their memory by means of celebrations which regularly reproduce their fruits. ..



Religion

“We have already seen how the French Revolution established a whole cycle of holidays to keep the principles with which it was inspired in a state of perpetual youth...”

Religion

“There are no gospels which are immortal, but neither is there any reason for believing that humanity is incapable of inventing new ones” (1954, pp. 475–476).

Religion

While men are losing faith in the old religions, new religions will be born. For all societies feel the need to express their collective sentiments, ideas, and ideologies in regular ceremony. All societies need a set of common values and moral guidelines to inspire their members to transcend their selfishness.

Religion

While the forms and particular symbols may change, religion is eternal.

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