

# Explore durkheim's contribution to sociological theory essay sample

[Religion](#)



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Emile Durkheim was born in France, and is widely regarded as the 'founding father' who put sociology on a professional footing in France in particular, and paved the way for this professionalisation to occur across the rest of Europe. He is now widely regarded as the 'father' of the so-called Structural-Functionalist approach in sociology: an approach developed by the North American sociologists Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton.

Durkheim always perceived his objective as establishing the legitimacy of sociology as a science, with its own protocols and domain. To demonstrate that society can be analysed scientifically, he wrote perhaps his best known work, on suicide. In this he seeks to demonstrate that even a highly individualistic act, such as suicide, has an important social context to it; and that the field of sociology is the best for its interpretation.

Durkheim's other important contribution to sociological theory, was his work on social values and alienation, and his Functionalist approach to social phenomena, and the division of labour.

The work of Durkheim is now conventionally described as a Functionalist approach to society whereby society is seen as a unity of integrated working parts. The functionalist believes that each part of the whole has a part to play in maintaining the continued existence of the whole, or Society. A functionalist can make an analogy with a machine, in order to illustrate their point, however Durkheim uses the 'biological analogy', equating complex modern societies with the human body. This biological analogy allows a functionalist, such as Durkheim to make explicit their holistic approach to the study of social phenomenon. Society exists 'Sui Generis'. 'Society' has a life

of its own and beyond the existence of the individuals who inhabit that society. Two further points are made using this analogy. Firstly that the various parts of the organism known as society are to be considered 'partialis' of the whole. This means that for the functionalist each part of the whole is considered a microcosm of the whole. Secondly, this means that each element of society, whether an individual, or a social institution, will have, as its main function, the maintenance of the stability and order of the whole society. Society is seen as resting on a consensus of aims and values.

According to Durkheim society comes in two forms, internal, and external. Firstly the internal society forms the 'collective moral conscience' (Farganis), it is seen as the defining mechanism in shaping our beliefs and attitudes, for survival in the world. If society does not conform to the internal society, then social isolation, ridicule, and other forms of punishment could occur. Examples of forces that maintain the internal society are the Religion, the Education and Legal systems. Durkheim saw society as using these 'tools' to attempt the maintenance of social order, and the construction of a socially acceptable individual.

External to society is the actual pressure from the community to conform to the collective, that is ways of thinking, acting, and feelings are external to society. In Durkheim's view, social facts exist externally to us and compel people to behave in a unified way, with norms that are constructed by society. These facts are recognisable through the power that the external persuasion has, which can be exercised over an individual.

In his early works, Durkheim contributed greatly to sociological theory in his definition of social facts. According to Coser in 'The Work' he defined them by their exteriority and constraint, focusing his primary concern on the operation of the law. His views later changed, and he stressed that social facts become competent guides and controls of conduct only to the extent that they become internalised by individuals while continuing to exist outside of them (Coser 1956). Social facts contain several characteristics, one of which is constraint. This is the ability to condition an individual to conform to society, for example, a person will receive a traffic ticket, if they go over the speed limit. The ticket is the act of constraint, because it is used as a way to force the person to adhere to the law that has been imposed.

A second characteristic is generality, which is something that is potentially universal and diffused with a group. Using the speeding ticket analogy again, the generality is that the speed limit applies to all persons that possess a valid driver's license.

A final characteristic included in social facts is externality, which constitutes a reality of sui-generis outside of any individual. A case in point, when a child is born, it is born without any constraints. Among others, cleanliness, obedience, and respect are imposed on the child from the time they are born. These are social facts that are external to the child.

Social phenomena arise, Durkheim argued, when interacting individuals constitute a reality that can no longer be accounted for in terms of the properties of individual actors. 'The determining cause of a social fact

should be sought among the social facts preceding it, and not among the states of the individual consciousness'. (Durkhiem 1960).

A political party, for example though composed of individual members, cannot be explained in terms of it's constitutive elements; rather, a party is a structural whole that must be accounted for by the social and historical forces that bring it into being, and allow it to operate. Durkhiem was concerned with the characteristics of groups and structures rather than with individual attributes. He focused on such problems as the cohesion or lack of cohesion of specific religious groups, not on the individual traits of religious believers. He showed that such group properties are independent of individual traits, and must therefore be studied in their own right.

Durkheim is perhaps most renowned for his contribution to sociological theory on suicide. Clearly, the subject of suicide is an important one for any sociologist, wishing to explain social life, in that an explanation must be sought as to why many thousands of people ' exit' society, voluntarily. Durkheim's use of this example of social phenomenon is to be applauded as he uses the issue of suicide to demonstrate that there is a role for a sociological explanation of suicide . He links the apparently individual act of suicide with the social structures and institutions of wider society.

In particular suicide is linked, in Durkheim's work with structure of social integration and social regulation, in society. His definition of suicide was the ' term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly, or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result'. (Durkheim's Suicide 1982).

Durkheim used this definition to separate true suicides from accidental deaths, then collected several European nation's suicide rate statistics, which proved to be relatively constant among those nations, and among demographics within those nations. Thus a collective tendency to suicide was discovered. Of equal importance to his methodology, Durkheim drew theoretical conclusions on the social causes of suicide. He proposed four types of suicide, based on the degrees of imbalance of two social forces, social integration, and moral regulation.

Egoistic suicide he argued resulted from too little social integration. Those individuals who were not sufficiently bound to social groups, and therefore well defined values, traditions norms, and goals, had little social support, or guidance, and therefore were more inclined towards suicide. As an example Durkheim discovered that unmarried people, particularly men, with less to connect them to stable norms, and goals, had higher suicide rates than those of married males.

Altruistic suicide he saw as the result of too much integration, where individuals were so involved with social groups, that they lost sight of their own individuality. The most common cases of this type of suicide were found among members of the military. An example of this type of suicide is the Kami Kasi pilots of the Japanese airforce in the Second World War, here the individual was willing to give their life for the collective will and society at large.

Anomic suicide was of particular interest to Durkheim, as it's causes he saw in moral, rather than social regulation. The basis for this type of suicide was

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an imbalance of means and needs, suicide occurred when the means were unable to fulfil needs. Higher suicide rates among the wealthy in society proved to him that industrial goals of wealth and property were insufficient in providing happiness.

The final type of suicide is Fatalistic suicide, Durkheim saw this as a rare phenomena, examples of this kind of suicide he gave as those with unrewarding lives, such as slaves, and childless married women.

In his theory of suicide we see Durkheim's true sociological value. Because social forces that effect human behaviour are the result of previous actions, it is the role of sociology to expose and understand these as the foundations of societal structure. Suicide is a vital contribution to sociological theory, as it is the first effective combination of sociological theory, and empiricism to explain a social phenomenon.

Durkheim's other great contribution to sociological thought can be found in his work on 'The Division of Labour'. Here he recognised that, the division of labour is almost always the most important concept in understanding societies. It is the cornerstone upon which, most sociological thought is built. In his own words 'Social harmony comes essentially from the 'division of labour'. It is characterised by a co-operation, which is automatically produced through the pursuit by each individual of his own interests. It suffices that each individual consecrate himself to a special function in order, by the force of events, to make himself solidary with others'. (Durkheim, 1933). Simply put, the division of labour is the separation and specialisation of work among people. As industry and technology proliferate, and the

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population increases, society must become more specialised, if it is to survive. This is especially evident in modern day society. Labour has never before been as specialised as it is now, and the current trend is toward even further increased specialisation.

Durkheim saw a fundamental difference between pre-industrial, and industrial societies. In the former there is relatively very little social differentiation: the division of labour is comparatively unspecialised. Social solidarity in pre industrial societies is based on similarities between individual members. They share the same beliefs and values, and, to a large degree the same roles. This uniformity binds members of society together in a close knit communal life.

Durkheim refers to unity, based on resemblance, as mechanical solidarity, which he sees as ' a likeness, at it's maximum when the collective conscience completely envelops our whole conscience and coincides with all points in it. But at that moment our individuality is nil. It can be borne, only if the community takes a small toll on us.'In a society based on mechanical solidarity, members are, as it were, produced from ' the same mould'.

Society in industrial society however is based not on uniformity, but on difference. Durkheim referred to this kind of unity, as organic solidarity. Just as in a physical organism, the various parts are different, yet work together to maintain the organism (for example the heart, liver, brain in the human body), so, in industrial society, occupational roles are specialised, yet function together to maintain the social unit. Where Marx saw the division of



labour as divisive, Durkheim believed it could increase the interdependence of members of society, and so reinforce social solidarity.

In order to produce goods and services more efficiently, members of industrial society specialise in particular roles. This requires co-operation, members of society are dependent on each other's specialised skills, and this interdependence forms the basis of organic solidarity. However the interdependence of skills and the exchange of goods and services are, in themselves, insufficient as a basis for social solidarity. The specialised division of labour requires rules and regulations, a set of moral codes, which restrain the individual, and provide a framework for co-operation. The exchange of goods and services cannot be based solely on self-interest, 'for where interest is the only ruling force each individual finds himself at war with every other'. To this end Durkheim saw the development of contract, as a beginning of the moral regulation of exchange.

Two parties enter into a legal agreement based on a contract for the exchange of goods and services. These are governed by a general legal framework, and grounded in shared beliefs about what is just, reasonable, fair, and legitimate. The division of labour is not without problems, and an industrial utopia does not form, simply out of interdependence, for specialisation has been seen to set people, not only apart, but also against each other. Interests often collide, and conflict arises. Durkheim, therefore did not fool himself into believing that the changes happening around him, as a result of industrialisation, would bring about total harmony,

but he did recognise that, though specialisation sets us apart, it does, in certain ways bind us together.

The 'Elementary forms of religious life', was Durkheim's last major work, written five years before his death in 1917. It is generally regarded as his best, and most mature contribution to sociological thought. Where his work on suicide focused on a large amount of statistics from various sources, his work on religion used one case study in depth, the Australian aborigines. Durkheim chose this group because he felt they represented the most basic, elementary, forms of religion within a culture.

In this work, he set primarily, out to achieve two things. Firstly, to establish the fact that religion was not divinely or supernaturally inspired, and was in fact a product of society. Also, to identify the common things that religion placed an emphasis on, as well as what effects those religious beliefs had on the lives of all within a society. His findings that religion was a social phenomenon can be seen from this excerpt from his work.' Religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of assembled groups, and which are destined to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they should be social affairs and the product of collective thought. At least - for in the actual condition of our knowledge of these matters, one should be careful to avoid all radical and exclusive statements - it is allowable to suppose that they are rich in social

elements'. (Thompson 1982, taken from The ' elementary forms of religious life'.)

Recognising the social origin of religion, Durkheim argued that religion acted as a source of solidarity and identification for the individuals within a society, especially as part of mechanical solidarity systems, and to a lesser, but still important extent, in the context of organic solidarity. Religion provided a meaning for life, it provided figures of authority, and, most importantly, for Durkheim, it reinforced the morals, and social norms held collectively by all within a society. Far from dismissing religion as mere fantasy, despite its natural origin, Durkheim saw it as a critical part of the social system. Religion he saw as providing social control, cohesion, and purpose for people, as well as another means of communication and gathering for individuals to interact and reaffirm social norms.

Durkheim's second purpose was in identifying certain elements of religious beliefs that are common across different cultures. A belief in a supernatural realm is not necessary, or common among religions, but the separation of different aspects of life, physical things, and certain behaviours into two categories, the sacred and the profane, is common. Objects, and behaviours deemed sacred were considered part of the spiritual, or the religious realm. They were part of rites, objects of reverence, or simply behaviours deemed special by religious belief. Those things deemed profane were everything else in the world that did not have a religious function, or hold religious meaning. However while these two categories are rigidly defined, and set

apart, they interact with one another, and depend on each other, for survival.

The sacred world cannot survive without the profane world to support it, and give it life, and vice versa. In general, those aspects of social life given moral superiority or reverence are considered sacred, and all other aspects are part of the profane. For example, the Catholic Church respects the crucifix and the behaviours, and actions performed during Mass as sacred, while other behaviours, and actions are not. While Native American societies differed greatly in the details, those religions also held certain objects and behaviour sacred, such as certain animals, and the rituals and rites performed by the Shaman. This division of things into two separate, but interacting spheres, he found to be common among all religions, " sacred things are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects'.

Durkheim, concerned with social solidarity throughout his academic career, was primarily concerned with religion as a functional source of social cohesion. It is able to reaffirm collective morals and beliefs in the minds of all members of society. To Durkheim this was important, because, left to their own devices the beliefs, and convictions of individuals would weaken in strength, and require reinforcement. Religion maintains the influence of society, whereas ' society' ' represents the norms, and beliefs held in common by a group of individuals.

' Crime brings together honest men and concentrates them'. ( Giddens 1972), excerpt from ' The Division of Labour' ).

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This quote exemplifies the stance Durkheim took toward crime. He recognised deviance as important to the well being of society, and proposed that challenges to established moral and legal laws, acted to unify the law abiding. Recognition and punishment of crimes is, in effect, the very reaffirmation of the laws and moral boundaries of a society. He saw crime as actually producing social solidarity, rather than weakening it. Durkheim also proposed that crime and deviance brought people in a society together. When a law is violated, especially within small communities, everyone talks about it. Meetings are held, articles written for local newspapers, in general a social community bristles with activity when a norm is broken. As is most often the case, a violation incites the non-violators (society as a whole) to cling together, in opposition to the violation, reaffirming that society's bond, and it's adherence to certain norms.

Despite criticisms made of him, there is no doubt that Durkheim's work helped establish sociology as an academic, scientific discipline. His functional approach to the study of social phenomena; his work on theories of suicide, religion, and crime, have earned him his place as the 'founding father of sociology'.