

The influence of durkheim on modern criminological investigation essay



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The 'father of academic sociology' (Hopkins Burke, 2006), Emile Durkheim believed that crime was an important necessity in every society as it played important functional roles in the maintenance of social cohesion, the continuity of social progress and the establishment and reinforcement of societal norms. He stated that criminality was a normal phenomenon, its influence prevalent even on the most saintly of societies. Durkheim's theories regarding the normality and inevitability of crime, along with his influential concepts of anomie, the division of labour and mechanical and organic solidarity, had a lasting effect on the field of criminological study, particularly in subsequent research conducted by fellow populist theorists of the Chicago School.

Emile Durkheim was one of the first sociologists to reject both biological and psychological populist theories of crime and criminal behaviour in an attempt to analyse criminality as a social phenomenon (Hopkins Burke, 2006).

Central to his sociological perspective of crime was the concept of anomie which he defined as "the breakdown of social norms and values" leading to "social disorganisation" of many forms, including an overabundance of criminal activity. He used anomie in his most famous work, *The Division of Labour* (Durkheim, 1933), in which he broke down societies into two distinct categories depending on the complexity and sophistication of the division of labour present. Traditional, pre-modern societies contained what he proclaimed to be mechanical solidarity.

This type of society was characterised by a simple division of labour and conformity amongst societal members. The public shared identical understanding of societal norms and values, whilst crimes and to a lesser

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extent individuality were dealt with by harsh, retributive punishment. As years passed, rapid social changes such as urbanisation and significant technological advances lead to a more complex system of division of labour. This along with the rise of individualism and the decline of conformity was characteristic of what Durkheim defined as organic solidarity. Most importantly, Durkheim advocated that during periods of significant and rapid social change, the shift from a traditionalist to a modernist society, where norms, values and laws were not yet established, anomie and social disorganisation would arise which in turn would lead to a significant increase in criminal activity.

According to Tierney (2006), Durkheim's believed crime was a normal and inevitable phenomenon in every society. He argued that 'crime is a social fact' and that 'if such things are found in an 'average' society, then they are normal'. A society without crime would therefore be abnormal and 'pathological'. He illustrated the fact that when a society attempts to eliminate crime by enforcing harsh, retributive punishments on those who breach criminal law, they are unknowingly restricting individual freedom and the future progress and development of that particular society. Increasing repressive legislation inevitably lead to deeds previously considered as acts of nonconformity and self expression being classified as criminal.

Durkheim did, however, state that theoretically, a society without crime may exist if and every member was in absolute agreement about societal norms and values. However, as he later stated, 'a uniformity so universal and absolute is utterly impossible' (Durkheim, 1982). Therefore, due to the

overabundance of contrasting social demographics in modernist
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communities, especially in regards to differing cultures, religions and age groups, disagreements are bound to occur in regards to what should be considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. These disagreements may lead to extreme acts of nonconformity to both the law which governs the society in question and the values established and accepted by the majority of the populous.

One of Durkheim's most notions was that crime is not only normal, but also plays several necessary, functional roles in society. According to Tierney (2006), Durkheim believed crime serves both 'adaptive' and 'boundary maintenance' functions. Crime serves an adaptive function by allowing change and development in not only the social system, but also the legal system. A particular crime, for example, may evoke high degrees of moral outrage from members of a community, which in turn may lead to the amendment of related legislations in an effort to further criminalise future events of a similar nature and appease the public. On the other hand, modernisation of a society, which is followed by the revision and reestablishment of social norms and goals, acts previously deemed immoral and criminal in traditionalist communities may be decriminalised and become entrenched as a perfectly acceptable lifestyle choice.

Durkheim mentions Socrates as an example of crime fulfilling an adaptive function. Socrates' philosophies were regarded as dangerous, whilst he was seen as a criminal and condemned to death by his own society, today he is recognised as one of the most brilliant and advanced minds of his

generation. Crimes other vital function involves the reinforcement or

particular norms and legislations. When a specific crime is committed, media
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portrayals of events and the general public and legislative reactions are enough to reaffirm social norms and boundaries of behaviour. Several sociological positivists agree with Durkheim's view of crime is normal and in some, limited way helps maintain a healthy, cohesive society, there are quite a large number of critiques in regards to the functions of crime.

Roshier (1977) strongly disagreed with Durkheim, proclaiming crime serves neither an adaptive nor a boundary maintenance function. He questions Durkheim's inference to Socrates by suggesting that his philosophies would have been just as influential had they not been previously criminalised.

Roshier, also maintained that Durkheim has been misinterpreted in regards to what he meant by 'boundary maintenance'. He suggests that Durkheim was suggesting that a collective response to crime, not actual crime, maintains the moral boundaries between right and wrong (Tierney, 2006).

Future generations of criminologists have been greatly influenced by Durkheim's sociological interpretation of crime and criminal behaviour.

Several of his theories have been adopted and expanded by famous theorists, including Robert Merton who utilised Durkheim's anomie to create his Strain Theory.

Many of the studies performed by members of the Chicago school were clearly influenced by several of Durkheim's theories. They, like their predecessor, viewed and analysed criminal activity as a something constructed by several social factors, as opposed to previously mentioned biological and psychological interpretations. The Chicago school theorists borrowed Durkheim's concept of anomie to form the concept of social

disorganisation, which was the key, underlying idea behind the majority of <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-durkheim-on-modern-criminological-investigation-essay/>

their studies. The idea crime is “ a product of disintegrating neighbourhoods” (Einstadter & Henry, 1995) correlates with Durkheim’s suggestion that crime is most prevalent in societies undergoing periods of rapid social change.

Burgess ([1925] 1967) whilst developing his concentric conception of criminality in an effort to link crime rates with levels of disorganisation, reiterates what Durkheim proclaimed before him, that crime is inevitable.

He expands the theory by suggesting that criminality is a natural outcome of physical and economic instability in modern societies. Hence, criminal behaviour is a normal response to ‘ pathological’ responses. The Chicagoans also adopted some of the necessary purposes of crime introduced by Durkheim, its adaptive function in particular. Therefore, the Chicago School used several aspects of Durkheim’s disorganisation theory and developed these concepts further to explain, analyse and interpret crime and criminal statistics in a much more thorough and comprehensive manner. Overall, Emile Durkheim had a profound influence on the field of criminology.

His theories regarding anomie, disorganisation and the division of labour have been extensively replicated, expanded and modified by many social scientists in an effort to explain crime from a sociological, as opposed to individualist perspective. His most controversial concepts regarding the normality, the inevitability and necessity of crime have been subject to intense debate, yet they remain highly respected and cited in several studies. The Chicago school was influenced by several aspects of his analysis during the production of their own brand of socially based explanations of crime and criminal behaviour based on social disorganisation. Today, the work of Emile Durkheim attracts great interest and study due to the fact that <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-durkheim-on-modern-criminological-investigation-essay/>

a majority of his theories and concept remain relevant even in the post-modernist era of crime and criminology. References: Burgess, E ([1925] 1967) ' The Growth of the City' in R Park, E Burgess & R McKenzie (eds.), The City, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

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