

Durkheim's approach to sociological analysis



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Outline the main features of Durkheim's approach to sociological analysis, and discuss how this may be used to understand suicide rate.

Durkheim was a French positivist, with an emphasis on functionalism, which revolves around a biological analogy where in society, is seen as an organic whole with each component working to maintain the others, similar to the human body. Its main interest is seeing how these parts create a stable whole.

One of the main areas of Durkheim's approach is the focus on social facts, these are social phenomena and ways of thinking and behaving that restrain individuals in some manner or other and can include institutions such as the state and education. They appear from collectively formed rules and practices, be they religious or secular and are beyond our control as individuals. Because of these social facts individuals have little or no control over their own actions, rather than constructing their own world they are directed by the system as society needs certain social behaviours and phenomena to survive. These social facts are passed on from generation to generation and shared among the individuals. From this perspective it is not individual will that drives behaviours but rather the common norms and values of society that shape one's consciousness. "Not only are these types of behaviour and thinking external to the individual, but they are endowed with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him" (Durkheim, 1895 pp50). These social facts form the basis of a collective consciousness, which Durkheim sees as 'the body of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society' (Durkheim, 1893). This collective consciousness promotes solidarity, forging a common bond between individuals in a

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society, creating a form of order and stability. Without a form of moral consensus there would be conflict and disorder “ From where interest is the only ruling for each individual finds himself in a state of was with every other” (Durkheim, 1973, p89) Since the collective consciousness is a social fact it too constrains individuals to act in terms of the greater good and for the good of the society and is deeply imprinted on the individual as without it there would be no society as we know it. These social facts can have problems if they regulate too much or not enough, without enough control the individual would give in to their own wants and desires, with too much they would feel repressed, inevitably both will lead to deviance, that being going against the norms and values of society.

From a collective consciousness come two forms of solidarity, organic and mechanical. Organic solidarity is based upon a dependence that individuals in an advanced society place on each other. It is common among societies where the division of labor is high. Though individuals perform different tasks and often have different values and interests, the order and survival of society depends on their reliance on each other to perform their specific tasks. Mechanical solidarity on the other hand is based upon the similarities among individuals in a society, within it people feel connected through similar work, education and religious practices. It primarily exists in societies that possess a low division of labour where there is little interdependence between individuals and where there is a basic or lack of organisation and compared to societies with organic solidarity there is more value placed on religion, society and its interests and there is a greater collective consciousness and less emphasise placed on individualism, that being where

you count yourself as an individual rather than part of a group, putting yourself first etc (Haralambos 2004 pp??). From organic solidarity and individualism can come anomie, this is a sense of normlessness, where norms themselves are unclear, broken down or unregulated “ If the rules of the conjugal morality lose their authority, and the mutual obligations of husband and wife become less respected, the emotions and appetites ruled by this sector of morality will become unrestricted and uncontained, and accentuated by this very release; powerless to fulfil themselves because they have been freed from all limitations, these emotions will produce a disillusionment which manifests itself visibly...”(Durkheim, 1972, p. 173) He noted that it was common in societies that possessed a less defined collective consciousness and a higher amount of individualism”...The state of anomie is impossible whenever interdependent organs are sufficiently in contact and sufficiently extensive. If they are close to each other, they are readily aware, in every situation, of the need which they have of one-another, and consequently they have an active and permanent feeling of mutual dependence.”(Durkheim, 1895, p184)

Imbalances in the amount of regulation caused by social facts and the amount of integration from solidarity are one of the main factors within suicide, less advanced societies having too much integration and regulation and industrial societies have too little of either. Durkheim said that suicide was a social act, not entirely an individual one revolving around the relationships between the individual and society. He found that there was a correlation between the suicide rate and various social facts. For example he found that suicide rates were higher in protestant countries than catholic

ones, he also found that there was a low rate during times of social and political upheaval due to the amount of solidarity that such events creates (Durkheim in Marsh, pp66-69). He laid out four types of suicide, depending on the degree that individuals were involved in society and on the degree that their behaviour was regulated. The four types being egoistic, anomic, altruistic and fatalistic. Egoistic suicide is common in industrial societies with high amounts of division of labour and comes from a high amount of individualism, which stems from a low amount of integration due to a weak collective consciousness from the social groups from which they originally belonged; in effect society allows the individual to escape it “ In this case the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching himself to society is itself slack” (Durkheim in Marsh pp67). This sort of suicide Durkheim said accounted for the differences of suicide rates between Protestants and Catholics, with Catholicism’s demanding a higher amount of conformity, in comparison to the Protestant church that encouraged the individual to interpret the religious texts in their own way without stigma. Another type of suicide common in industrial societies is anomic which results from a low amount of regulation. It occurs when norms and values are disrupted by social change, procuring feelings of uncertainty within the individual. “ Whenever serious readjustments take place in the social order, whether or not due to a sudden growth or to an unexpected catastrophe, men are more inclined to self destruction” (Durkheim in K. Thompson, 1971, pp109) Durkheim found that suicide rates rose during positive as well as negative directions of social change. He noted that there was a rise after the crash of the Paris stock exchange in 1882 and the conquest of Rome in 1870 by

Victor-Emmanuel which resulted in rising salaries and living standards but also a rise in the suicide rate.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is altruistic suicide that comes from a high amount of integration and strong feeling of society and solid collective consciousness. This form of suicide is mostly present in pre-industrial societies who possess mechanical solidarity. This was seen as a self sacrifice for the good of the group “ This sacrifice then is imposed by society for social ends” (Durkheim in Marsh, pp68). It is not done because it seen as the best option but more out of a sense of duty to said group. For someone to do such an act out of duty then they must have little self worth, the individual being fully submerged into a group and feeling like just a part of a greater thing, thus highly integrated. “ For society to be able to compel some of its members to kill themselves, the individual personality can have little value. For as soon as the latter begins to form, the right to existence is the first conceded” (Ibid, pp68) Various examples of this can be seen throughout history, Vikings considers it dishonourable to die of old age or sickness and so ended their own lives to avoid social disgrace. Durkheim placed no importance on fatalistic suicide, saying that it had more place in history than in modern societies. It occurred when society restricted an individual so much that they were repressed, feeling that they had no futures or dreams.

One of the major criticisms of Durkheim’s analysis is his concepts of integration and regulation. Durkheim gives no hint as to how one would measure integration or regulation for example – he simply asks us to assume that such “ underlying” concepts are significant in relation to the explanation of suicide. He assumes that suicidal behavior results from a deviation from

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normal levels of integration and regulation. We are given no idea what exactly is a normal level, so we cannot say what amount of regulation and integration is normal or abnormal (Web ref 1). However with some work, it could be possible to come up with various test relating to theses concepts, so that we could measure them among different groups in society. A second criticism is that his work on suicide is based upon official statistics from the 19th century He gives us little idea about the reliability of the source of the statistics and the methods used in recording them could not be up to scratch, some could be wrong, since they were hand written things could be misread and so on. Another factor is that the determination of suicide involves is process of interpretation by numerous people such as policemen, doctors, coroners etc (Ibid). In this respect, we have no real way of determining either the reliability or validity of suicide statistics. The coroner is the one who decides whether death was due to suicide or not and various factors can sway his judgment towards it not being so. The individual's verdict depends on their outlook on their work and on their outlook on suicide. Some would be thorough in the investigation whilst others would be concerned about not intruding upon the rights and feelings of the surviving relatives. For example if the victim was Catholic, since traditionally the Catholic Church view suicide as a sin, the coroner may well make his decision based on the effect that the stigma that a suicide verdict carries may have on the relatives. It is known that coroners in Catholic countries such as Italy and Mexico are more-reluctant to classify a suspicious death as suicide than coroners in non-Catholic countries. Another fact is that some countries suicide is classified as a crime, in such countries, coroners tend to be more-reluctant to classify a death as suicide than in countries where such

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a law does not apply, for example when suicide was illegal in Britain the punishment was that deceased property would be ceased by the state, so it would be justifiable to deem a suicide as something else to avert any more tragedy. Also where the victim was insured against death, coroners tend to be less likely to classify death as suicide than in instances where there is none, as such an act can void the coverage. One final criticism is that he does not take into look into individual action as a cause; however he does briefly acknowledge it but claims that it has no part in sociology (Ibid)

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