

Emile Durkheim and Sociology

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Emile Durkheim is a very well-known founder in sociology, and this is due to the staying power of his theoretical contributions. He is widely known for his book the *Division of Labor* where he discusses primitive and contemporary societies which can be applied to the world we live in. Examining his theories, ideas, and arguments we can understand how and why he has been and will continue to be an important contributor in sociology. This essay will also examine Emile Durkheim's arguments in relation to suicide and the four types: Altruistic, Egoistic, Anomic, and Fatalistic in which they are related to society today. Although these ideas were created many years ago, they are still extremely relevant.

Durkheim was born on April 15th, 1858, in France to a Jewish family. France was going through political unrest which resulted in political debates and ultimately shaped the world Durkheim was living in. Durkheim was the youngest of four children and he grew up as a mature child with adult behaviors (Riley, 2015). As he grew up, he ultimately broke away from his Jewish religion but remained in the community. He graduated from Ecole normale superieure where he studied philosophy and eventually began pushing for social reform. He was married to Louise Julie Dreyfus, and they had a daughter and a son. Their son died at the age of 23 leading to a Durkheim's mental decline. Also, in Durkheim's life he enrolled in classes at lycee Louis-le-Grand located in Paris. This was where many strong intellectuals studied, dealing with stress, emotions, and even depression. However, during his time here he made little friends, but he remained close with the ones he made during his time at the school (Riley, 2015). The schooling and education that Emile Durkheim acquired over the years of his life formed him intellectually and as a person. The people and ideas he was surrounded by and learned helped form his theories that are still prevalent in sociology today.

A major concern and focus for Emile Durkheim was social order. He believed that the root of inequality and conflicts was due to economic competition, and he wanted to correct and reform the economy. He thought of society as a system of a combination of factors which were needed for society to keep functioning ultimately leading him to create functionalism. As his foundation to sociology, he used the concept of social facts. Social facts are the idea that society and individuals can exist away from one another. Some major subjects that Durkheim was interested in were solidarity and cultural diversity. He was mostly concerned and focused on these areas and how humans use it and create it. There are two types of solidarity mechanical and organic which are talked about in his book *Division of Labor*. Mechanical is conforming to societal norms and being divided based on kin. Organic is when society operates but uses the support of other systems which are needed to function (Emirbayer, 2003).

On the topic of suicide Durkheim wanted to study it not on the individual level. He also wanted to examine it on the social level while considering social facts. He classified the types of suicide by the different events in society that could have caused it. Altruistic suicide is where individuals normally have close ties with their community and feel they have certain expectations to meet. Egoistic suicide is when individuals have weak connections to their social group. Lastly, Anomic suicide is when there is a lack of social stability that other individuals have. The issue he wanted to answer was about social diversity. His concepts on suicide to this day are considered one of his most important contributions to sociology (Emirbayer, 2003).

Some of Durkheim's major theoretical contributions are about solidarity and suicide. Durkheim believed there to be two problems for people in society. Group attachment and behavioral regulation, which can factor into the cause of suicide for some people. Humans are social beings and desire a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose. So, when group attachment

is low there is no longer this sense of belonging which in turn makes egoistic suicide more likely. This type of suicide comes into play because the individuals who commit this act believe they lost their sense of belonging to the group. Thus, causing them to lose their meaning and purpose, making them feel isolated. Another type of suicide Durkheim came up with was altruistic suicide. This type of suicide is where there is an attachment to a group but unlike egoistic there is too much attachment. With this type of suicide people lose their sense of who they are and become in a sense one with the group. When this type of suicide is most likely seen is when people give up their life for the group because there is an overwhelming group attachment. People lose their individuality, and the group becomes more important to them. When it comes to behavioral regulation there are many reasons for it or not for it. However, in relation to suicide it may not always be a good thing. When culture cannot keep up with social changes such as population and diversity there is a higher chance for anomic suicide. The reason for this is because there is less regulation which means an increase in the feeling like they don't belong among the individuals (Allan & Daynes, 2017). The fourth type of suicide, fatalistic, is not like anomic suicide, instead it is the opposite. This type of suicide occurs when there is way too much regulation in a person's life. People who commit this type of suicide feel that there is no future for them as they are in an oppressive situation causing a sense of meaninglessness to that individual (Emirbayer, 2003).

Durkheim's contributions to sociology are still relevant today as we can see that suicides are one of the top causes of death among college students especially athletes (Muyor-Rodríguez, Caravaca-Sánchez, & Fernández-Prados, 2021). In recent years there has been an increase in suicides not just among college students but in all populations in the United States. There is research that shows being involved in an athletic team can help create social bonds thus reducing

suicide. However, participation in an athletic team can also cause suicidal thoughts and activities. According to Durkheim's ideas on suicide this could be due to not feeling like they belong in a group perhaps because of injury and not being able to play, regulation or oppression of the player, or the sport becomes their whole life. Through research they found that injuries and physical contact help contribute to suicide among college athletes. Campaigns help reduce injuries and there is an emphasis on protecting mental health (Dodd, Harris, Allen, Velkoff, & Smith, 2021).

Another example that Durkheim's contributions to sociology are still relevant today is the COVID-19 college students. College students are one of the most vulnerable groups when it comes to mental health issues. There was an overall increase in relation to these problems among college students such as depression, anxiety, and suicide during COVID-19. A study had been done and there had been a significant relation between suicide, anxiety, and social support. It was also found that college students are affected due to public health issues, and they may need to receive more help and social support (Muyor-Rodríguez, Caravaca-Sánchez, & Fernández-Prados, 2021). Using the ideas from Durkheim this could be due to them needing their sense of belonging and group attachment which is often lost during isolation like what was experienced during COVID- 19.

Emile Durkheim was a very important sociologist who formed many ideas and theories that are relevant even today. He gained knowledge from multiple institutions which led him to ask questions about society and how it functions and why. He came up with theories about suicide and the terms in which certain types occur. His theoretical contributions were created in a society much different from the one we live in now, yet they are still relatable. This is due to the usage of it and simplicity of it in which can be applied to different situations to give them

meaning and to help better understand what is occurring. Without Durkheim's contributions we may still not have known about suicide and why it occurs.

References

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